

Montgomery County may face battles after recommendation to thin out bureaucracy

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In 2009, a few years after a body that has come to be known as the Commission on Commissions recommended getting rid of some of Montgomery County's scores of government advisory boards, a council member sponsored legislation to cut a few.

"It was completely gutted - not a single board or commission was reduced," said council member George L. Leventhal (D-At Large). His proposal targeted several county recreation advisory groups that the commission considered redundant.

On Tuesday another citizen advisory group, the Montgomery County [Organizational Reform Commission](#), completed six months of work by handing the County Council a long list of suggestions for [how officials could save vast sums by slashing duplication and improving its operations](#). Among the recommendations: rolling back a handful of Montgomery's 86 boards, committees and commissions.

The commission also called for making more information public on negotiations with public employee unions; pushing county agencies toward a more Internet-based, cloud-computing model to reduce information-technology costs; better cooperation on purchasing among government entities; and lobbying for a variety of legal changes in Annapolis covering public schools spending and other issues.

Commission co-chairman Richard Wegman said an early estimate found that adopting all the recommendations would save more than \$30 million annually, including more than \$2.5 million from cutting committees. A more detailed analysis could push total yearly savings into the hundreds of millions dollars, he said.

As the county seeks to close a budget gap of about \$300 million this year, some officials warned that the reform commission's final report is threatened by the same dynamics that have undercut previous moves to streamline government, among them parochialism, bureaucratic inertia and political infighting.

Fiscal problems in play

But County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) and some members of the County Council said the depth of the county's fiscal problems makes this go-around different.

Backers said the commission's structure was designed to help speed adoption of the changes. According to the council resolution setting up the process, Leggett has until the

end of February to accept the various proposals or to come up with a reform plan of his own that would save the same amount of money.

The council plans to vote on Leggett's government reform proposal, although the county's charter doesn't require such a vote. Any ideas Leggett does not include will go before the council as well, according to the resolution.

"Every aspect of this will get an up or down vote before the next budget is approved," said council member Roger Berliner (D-Potomac-Bethesda), who pushed for creating the commission.

Leggett praised the commission - its members were appointed by the council and county executive - and said he plans to adopt most of its recommendations.

While "there may be some tweaking," Leggett said, "my view is they've done a pretty comprehensive job. . . . I like the overall approach.

"We have to do serious reform. I am more willing to look at it comprehensively and boldly," rather than tentatively, Leggett said.

Controversial proposals

Many of the recommendations are controversial, particularly in [a county that has a long history of generous spending on services for the public](#) and compensation for its employees. A variety of interests that long have been influential in Montgomery - including the public schools, government employee unions and women's groups - all would be affected.

[The Commission for Women](#), for instance, would be restructured to save more than \$800,000. Its "counseling and career center is now duplicated to a great extent" by other government programs and private groups, according to the 70-page reform proposal. The [Commission on Human Rights](#), with a budget of more than \$1.7 million, also would be restructured. The office fights discrimination, but state and federal help is available on that front, according to the report.

Leggett would not discuss whether he would adopt the recommendations on those groups, saying that he wanted to consider the package as a whole before commenting.

Historical indicators

If history's any indication, some of the ideas are bound to fall flat.

Leventhal's 2009 legislation would have nixed four regional recreation advisory boards, giving their tasks to other existing advisory commissions. The legislation also would have trimmed another eight such bodies, eliminating a dozen across the county. A

countywide recreation board would have continued as before. The Committee Evaluation Review Board also urged reductions.

But the push back was strenuous.

"The only people who showed up to testify on legislation to reduce the number of boards and commissions from 84 to 72 were members of the 12 boards and commissions, who all believe they are indispensable," Leventhal said. "The lesson is that changes to the status quo are opposed by those who are affected by the change. And the broad public is not engaged."

Wegman, who worked as staff director of the U.S. Senate Governmental Affairs Committee in the 1970s, said changes would be more likely to pass when they are part of a broader package. That keeps the focus on solving bigger-picture problems, rather than on particular controversial elements.

"It was the key to getting federal reorganization through," Wegman said. "That would get them through at the county level, too."